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by the author of

"Miss Toosey's Mission" and "Laddie"

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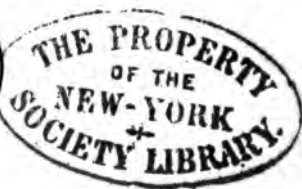


RIS.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"MISS TOOSEY'S MISSION," "LADDIE," "TIP-CAT,"
"OUR LITTLE ANN," "PEN," "LIL," "ZOE,"
"ROSE AND LAVENDER," Etc.

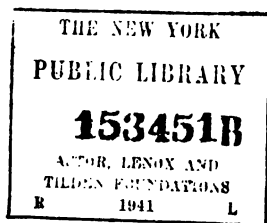
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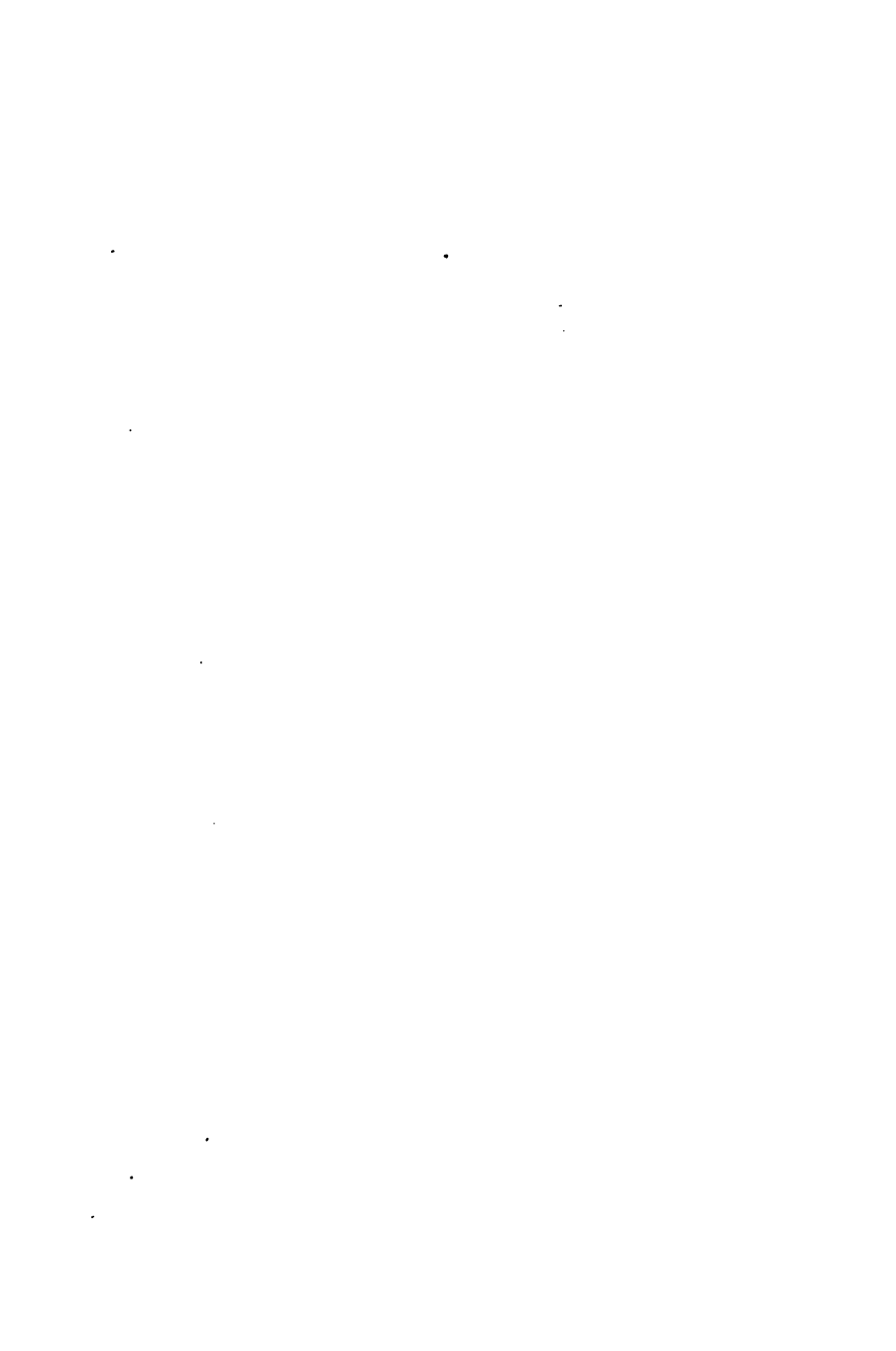
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P R I S.



CHAPTER I.

IN MOTHER'S PLACE.

To toil in tasks, however mean,
For all we know of right and true,
In this alone our worth is seen,
T' is this we were ordained to do.

STERLING.

PRIS was only fourteen when her mother died; and she was suddenly called upon to take the head of the household, to clean and cook and wash and market and send off the children to school and take care of Baby and make the boys mind. She was nothing more than a child herself

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up to the day when all this devolved upon her, being childish for her age, and not one of those premature little women who become their mothers' right-hand as soon as they are out of their cradles, and prefer school to holidays, and their sewing or a book to a game of play. Why, the very day her mother died, Pris was out with her skipping-rope. She went to fetch the medicine, and thought it would take less time to go to the surgery skipping than it would walking or running.

But a week later she used that skipping-rope to mend the clothes-line, without taking a single turn with it, though there was no one to see.

J. G. V. M.

"I suppose," the neighbors said to her father, "as you'll get some one to come and do for you and the children. Ain't there none of your own folks as could come and bide a bit?"

But Blake shook his head despondently. He was a meek-spirited man, rather deaf, and he had always been ruled by his wife, and had never had to decide anything for himself since she settled which arm he was to give her as they came out of church after their wedding.

"Ask your mother," or "Ask the missus," was always his answer when any question was put to him; and even now that she was under the

turf in the churchyard, he could hardly keep the words off his lips, so habitual had they become.

But he did not somehow at first like being ruled by other people, and he did not, strange to say, marry again, as every one said he would and should for the sake of the children. The neighbors gave him much advice on the subject, and even suggested suitable people,—“A decent widder woman, as I knows, as kep her first husband’s house like a new pin,” or, “Mary Anne, as lives cook at Parson’s and have a tidy bit of money put by in savings-bank.”

Perhaps Blake might have followed

their advice if it had not been for Pris; but she, having once laid down her skipping-rope, and twisted her very curly hair into as tidy a knob at the back of her head as its nature would permit, and having pinned on one of Mother's aprons, whose length she hoped would make up for the shortness of the skirts underneath, and taken up the reins of government, had no notion of giving them up again and relapsing into pinafores and submission to a stepmother, whose rule, tradition says, is often not very agreeable.

But when sufficient time had elapsed to make it decent for Blake to think of replacing his wife; when

“Mary Anne at Parson’s” began to show interest in the condition of the widower’s knitted stockings, and called in Tom and Harry on their way from school to give them a bit of cake; and when the suitable “widder woman” dropped in several times, and went away loudly lamenting the state the cottage was kept in, and the holes in the badly washed shirt that fluttered from the skipping-rope line in the garden, — by this time, I say, Blake had got into the way of saying, “Ask Pris,” when referred to; and I think even if Mary Anne or the “widder woman” had got him as far as the altar-rails, and the parson had asked him, “Wilt thou

have this woman to thy wedded wife?" he would have answered, "Ask Pris;" and I am sure what Pris's answer would have been.

I dare say it would have been better for Pris and all of them to have had some one to take care of them. It certainly would have been far more comfortable, for the "widder woman" was quite right in her criticisms on the state of the cottage; and even to bring it to that state of imperfection, Pris had to toil early and late, and used to creep to bed at night with very aching limbs and weary head, and yet with the unsatisfactory feeling that she had not done half she intended, and had done badly what she had accomplished.

She made all sorts of mistakes, — boiled the family flannels, which were not generous to begin with, and could not afford to be reduced to about half their size ; she scorched and burned shirts and frocks, not to speak of her own fingers and cheeks ; she ran out of bread some days and took too much on others ; she spent half washing-day trying to light the copper with green wood ; she patched Tom's trousers one Saturday night by candle-light, and found next morning that those blue garments had been mended with vivid green, and Tom, though he was only twelve and too young to be a dandy, refused to go to Sunday-school or church

because the chaps would make game of him.

Making the boys mind was the hardest part of Pris's duties. She could make Harry and Jimmy mind pretty well by main force, — they were to be reduced to tears by thumping; but Tom was too near her own size, and thumped back, and had a sudden way of turning upside down and kicking, which was difficult to cope with. He was not to be coaxed either, or bribed with such things as a sprinkling of sugar on his bread and butter, or a scrap of dripping with his potatoes. When he was more than usually "owdacious," he helped himself from the

sugar basin or dripping jar, and when he was better-behaved, pretended that he did not care for either of those delicacies.

The girls were better. Polly, who came next to Tom, was the same sort of gentle nature as her father; and Annie and Baby, the two youngest, regarded Pris as a grown-up person, and accordingly thought that all she said must be right, and that her decisions on such matters as going to bed or having more bread and butter were final, and could not be appealed against. And besides, as Pris said, Annie and Baby were always good. To which Tom would retort, "Good reason why,

because they always gets their own way."

"So would you, if you was like them."

But my story begins six years after that time of Mrs. Blake's death; and Pris is twenty, and Baby will be seven next birthday, and will be passed out of the infant school at the next examination, and protests against the pet name of Baby that still clings to her, and prefers to be called Lucy, if not the whole dignity of her three names, Lucy Matilda Alice.

Six years' experience has made quite a good manager of Pris, and given her a certain staid manner

which girls with mothers do not get so easily. It is wonderful how the care of a house interferes with a bit of fun. Pris could not do this, because she had to see to Father's dinner; and she could not do that, because it was washing-day. She could not stop late for something, because the children must go to bed; and she could not go off early somewhere else, because she had to start them to school.

She never had any money to spend on her own adornment; and there was not any mother to say, "Pris, you ain't had a new hat this ever so long, and your old ain't really fit to be seen, so Harry's trousers can

wait, if we puts a patch on 'em, and you just go off and choose one somat like Lizzie West's."

So Pris Blake, the village girls said, was not fit to be seen, "as did ought to be ashamed of making such a guy of herself;" and the money went into that constant drain on the resources, — boots. It really was a serious problem how to keep eight pairs of feet in boots, and three pairs of them boys' feet, kicking and rubbing and scraping, never still for a minute, till Pris wished with all her heart that boys could go to the blacksmith's along with the horses and be shod with iron.

But though the girls criticised

Pris's hat and the shabby jacket which had added a tinge of green in the course of years to its dingy black, and the velvet collar of which had lost all its nap, the young men and lads agreed that the face under the shabby hat was a very pretty one, and the figure, in spite of the old jacket and ill-fitting dress, very trim and neat; and that in spite of a certain staid motherly way with her, and always being too busy for a bit of fun, Pris was a good sort, and no humbug about her. And there was one of them who maintained that there was not another girl like her in Whistley, nor, for the matter of that, for miles round, nor in Meding-

ton, nor, as he'd heard tell, in London; and if any one ventured to express a doubt on the subject, Will Wiseman was ready to fight him, — which seemed a curious way of proving the superiority of a girl.

But Will Wiseman was a wild, hot-headed young fellow; and his arguments were very apt to be impressed on his opponent with his fists if milder means failed to persuade him. He was half a gypsy, and lived with a very disreputable old grandfather in a tumble-down cottage just on the edge of Whistley heath.

Tom had attached himself to Will, the attraction being, I am afraid, Will's skill in rabbiting; for he was

a first-rate hand at setting a wire, and knew all the haunts of the rabbits, and their ways and tastes, as well as if he had been a rabbit himself. He had a half-bred, wire-haired terrier, Jock, who was as clever a poacher as could be found, but who had the most deceptively innocent appearance on ordinary occasions, and doddled along the road past the game-keeper or the owner of the coverts as if he would not have known game either by scent or sight, any more, I was going to say, than an old woman's cat ; but that is a very bad simile, as she, with her tabby nose and chinks of expressionless eyes, is as keen after game as the most sporting dog in the land.

Will had always been a regular pickle of a boy, and Pris regarded the friendship between him and Tom with serious disapproval; for any piece of mischief in the village or neighborhood was always set down to Will Wiseman, and generally with justice, and to be chums with Will meant being constantly in hot water. She had not a good word for him; it was always, "Be off! Tom ain't a-coming. 'T ain't no use your bothering about." She set to once, and washed down the bricks with much swilling of water and flourishing of a mop, because he would stand about at the gate, and she could not otherwise get rid of him.

But she stood up for him once when he was falsely accused of having taken some apples from Farmer Lloyd's orchard, even though it got Tom into trouble. She knew that that Sunday morning when the apples were taken, Will and Tom were after the rabbits somewhere about in Squire Lupton's park. She had heard Will's whistle in the road just as she started the children for the Sunday-school; and Tom, who was fastening his boot-lace, and prepared to go off in an unusually lamb-like condition, heard it too, and his boot-lace thereupon broke, and there was not another to be found anywhere till it was too late for school; and

when church time came Tom was nowhere to be found. And Pris had seen Will slouch past with that coat with capacious pockets, out of one of which peeped the twinkling pink nose of a ferret, and which could contain a goodly number of rabbits without any one suspecting them; and there was Jock at his heels, looking as innocent as the day, and enjoying a stroll with his master with no thought of anything beyond.

Pris saw them come back too, and saw Tom take a look into those much-distended pockets, from which Will was evidently offering him a pick. But Tom shook his head, and pointed over his shoulder with his

thumb; and Pris guessed he was referring to her as the obstacle to his bringing home a nice plump rabbit for dinner.

So when Farmer Lloyd came round in a tremendous rage about his apples, his choice Blenheim oranges, which had been cleared off the tree during church time, and declared Will was at the bottom of it, Pris was able to clear his character in this direction; and he was already too deeply in the black books of the keepers for any harm to be done with them.

Tom got a thrashing from his father, which was a very rare occurrence, but severe when it did hap-

pen ; and the keepers kept a suspicious eye on him for some time to come.

But from that day Will Wiseman cherished a feeling of gratitude towards Pris, for those apples might have meant six weeks' hard labor ; and besides, Will had a peculiar code of honesty of his own, which he did not consider transgressed by knocking over a couple of rabbits or so, or setting a cunning wire, or by taking a few apples just to eat himself ; but to clear a tree of several bushels and cart them away for sale, he called thieving, and he would not have liked to be suspected of such an action.

His gratitude to Pris took incon-

venient shapes, such as a present of a young squirrel, taken at the risk of his neck from the topmost branches of a fir-tree, and brought down scratching and wriggling and biting like a fury.

“As if,” Pris said, “I had n’t enough creatures to look after already,” meaning the children; “and as if Harry was n’t mischievous and tiresome enough for twenty squirrels.”

He taught a blackbird with infinite pains to whistle a tune, and gave it in a clumsy cage of his own construction.

“As if,” Pris said, “I had time to be messing about after it, and keeping the cat from eating it; and I

was sick and tired of that stupid old tune before it was in the house a day."

But besides this, he showed his gratitude in useful ways, — unlimited clothes' pegs were provided; baskets, of strange shape, it is true, but strong and useful, were left inside the gate, or tossed to one of the children as they went by; if he happened to be passing (and he did happen to pass pretty frequently) when Pris was struggling with the long pole by which the bucket was lowered into the well to draw water, he was ready to draw as much as she wanted; and more than once, when she had sent one of the boys on an errand, Will

had undertaken it, and left Harry and Jimmy free to pursue their game of marbles or otherwise amuse themselves.

But the best part of Will's gratitude was shown in his attention to Tom's morals. No more cutting school or church and indulging in rabbiting; no more whistling him off the path of duty to join the idle lads round the sign-post by the pond; no more tossing half-pence by the wall near the "Cricketers;" no more encouragement to overcome the qualms of deadly sickness occasioned by the little pipe which in the earlier days of their friendship Will himself had given his youthful

admirer, — indeed, that little treasured clay pipe somehow found its way under Will's heel, perhaps by accident, one day when Tom had been describing, as an excellent joke, how Pris had blown him up on account of it.

“Will ain't near such a jolly chap as he was,” Tom complained. “He dropped on me like anything to-day because I said something as he and the other chaps says every day of their lives. One ain't a gal to be so mighty particular and mealy-mouthed.”

CHAPTER II.

A TIME OF TROUBLE.

Bits of gladness and of sorrow,
Strangely crossed and interlaid,
Bits of cloud-belt and of rainbow
In deep alternate braid.

BONAR.

It was when the children had the diphtheria that Pris grew to recognize the value of Will Wiseman. No one else would come near the cottage. Mary was out in service then, "and a good thing too," Pris said, "as she were out of the way;" though often and often she would have been glad of her help and of some one to pour out her hopes and

fears to, — more fears than hopes generally, for the children were undoubtedly very ill, and Pris, knowing little of illness, often thought them worse than they were.

Father was so deaf, a good deal deafer than when Mother died, and he could not hear the thick breathing that made Pris so terribly anxious; and it took so long to shout anything into his ear so as to reach his understanding, which perhaps was a little deaf too. So that Pris felt by the time she had repeated what she had to say half a dozen times, gradually getting louder and louder, she had often changed her own mind in the matter; so that now and then what

had begun with, "Don't Annie look bad?" turned ultimately into, "Don't Annie look better?" or *vice versa*. And as his answer was equally slow in coming, her opinion might have veered round to its original starting-point before he said, "Ay, that she do! mortal bad!" or "To be sure; a sight better!"

There was a regular scare in the village about diphtheria. Two children died of it with terrible suddenness; they were at school and playing about in the road one day, and dead the next. It was the first time anything of the sort had been known in the place; children had died of scarlet fever, or croup, or fits over

teething, and, once in a way, of accident, but this was something fresh and mysterious. They could not even pronounce the name, much less spell it. The mothers, and for the matter of that, the men too, got into a helpless state of panic, and could do nothing but watch the children and wonder whose turn might come next; and it was curious to notice that the usually most careless mothers were now, the most anxious. The greatest credulity prevailed as to what was likely to cure the disease or prevent it, and in almost every case where the doctor was called in, he found some curious ointment or nauseous brew, happily as harmless

as it was disgusting, which the parents had been using as an infallible cure; and I should think half the children wore little cotton bags tied round their necks under their clothes, containing something in the nature of a charm procured from an old woman reputed to possess supernatural powers.

The more sensible mothers were a little bit ashamed of these cotton bags, and treated them merely as a joke, saying, "Well, if they don't do no good, they can't do no harm;" and as, besides the charm, the bags contained a lump of camphor, they may have been right. But in spite of these bags, the illness spread

among the children, and the panic increased; so that when the Blake children took it, every one in the place was either taken up with nursing their own sick or mourning their dead, or in too great mortal dread of catching the complaint or of carrying it to their families, to come near Pris.

The four younger children all had it, and Annie so badly that no one thought she would ever recover. Mary, as I have said, was out of the way, being in service; and Tom, who was working at Lea Farm, looking after the farmer's nag, was found a bed up at the farm when the illness began, so that he should not go backwards and forwards.

So Pris was left very much to herself, and had a hard time of it with all the four ill together, and no one even to send on a message or lend a helping hand; at least, there would have been no one, if Will had not come to the fore.

I expect Pris's nursing would have shocked experts in that line; and even Dr. Pattison, who had a high opinion of Pris, shook his head over the untidiness and apparent discomfort that prevailed; but after all, the children all got well, and that is, I suppose, the main object of nursing.

But Will was worth his weight in gold just then; he was not a bit afraid of the infection. Indeed, that

very first day, when Pris was pretty well at her wit's end how to send for the medicine, and Annie was crying and would not let her go out of sight for a minute, she heard some one come stumping into the kitchen and straight through up the stairs to the bedroom, as if he had known the house all his life, instead of never having been asked inside the door before.

“Hullo!” he said; “ain’t there somat as I can do? How’s the kids?”

And off he went for the medicine, and was back in no time, and swept up the kitchen, and made up the fire, and filled the kettle, and was

handy to help with Harry, who objected strongly to having his throat painted, and kicked and fought to prevent its being done, but who was reduced to submission, and even to cheerful submission, by the grasp of Will's strong hand, and by his, "Hold up, old chap! Here's a lark! Where's that mouth of yours? Why, Jock can open his a deal wider! That ain't a mouth for a man of your size!"

After this Will was installed as throat painter; and even Baby preferred to be done by his great clumsy hands, and made a little fuss when Pris undertook it.

It would be hard to say what Will

did not put his hand to during that time of emergency. He even had a turn at the wash-tub more than once, and rubbed away with almost too much energy at the sheets, which required respectful treatment on account of age; he swept and scrubbed, and peeled potatoes, and made tea, and prepared beef-tea after a certain rough-and-ready receipt of Pris's.

One morning, when Annie was at the worst, Pris found out quite accidentally that he had not gone home at all during the night, but had slept in the wood-house, though he denied it with might and main, as he thought she might be vexed at his hanging about the place all night; but the

following evening she brought down a blanket and bid him stop, if he had a mind, by the fire, as, though it was March, the nights were still cold and frosty.

It was a great comfort to her, having him there, for in the deadly silence of the night, when you are the only one waking in the house, and are such an inexperienced nurse as poor Pris, all sorts of horrors come crowding on the anxious mind; and what may be really only peaceful sleep takes the grimmer form of death, and strange noises and ghostly movements make the familiar room full of nameless terrors.

On more than one occasion, when

she could endure the nervous strain no longer, she had roused her father from his peaceful, snoring slumbers; but this was a difficult process, and by the time he was fully awake, all the children were awake too, and she wished with all her heart that the silence, terrifying as it was, could be restored.

The mere consciousness that Will was downstairs had a wonderfully reassuring effect on her, so much so that when Annie was quiet and sleeping for a bit, Pris also dropped asleep, with her head on the child's pillow, and when she woke found that Jimmy, who was in the outside room with Father, had been awake

and asking for drink, and had been supplied by Will, whose sleep down below must certainly have been of the lightest to be broken by the boy's weak voice, which had not reached Pris in the next room. And when the cold gray dawn began to steal in, making the sleeping faces look more ghastly, and the candle, flickering in the socket, dull and dingy; and when, as often happens just at dawn, a wretched feeling of cold and shivering overwhelmed her, and heart and hope seemed to fail her, — it was very cheering to go down and find a nice little bit of bright fire and the kettle on, and Will making a cup of tea for her, and

to sit a bit talking in low tones of the events of the night, and to have her fears combated and a hopeful view taken of symptoms which would have appeared very black if she had been by herself.

Sometimes, in years to come, when Pris looked back on this time, which was not very often, as she was too busy as a rule, and perhaps too matter-of-fact and sensible, to waste time in looking back or looking forward, it seemed to her that in spite of the care and wearing anxieties, these days had been rather pleasant. The service of love is a very pleasant service, both to the one who gives and to the one who

takes; the humblest service done out of love, even human love, becomes "fine" and noble, though it may be only filling a kettle or peeling potatoes.

Pris did not a bit realize what made Will's services so gratifying, except that he did them so willingly, without even being asked to do them, instead of requiring to be hunted up and reminded and scolded and thumped into the performance of them, as her brothers did.

Neither perhaps did Will understand why he did all manner of things for Pris, which he would not have dreamed of doing for the old woman who "did" for his grand-

father, and who said "that of all the idlest, disobligingest, sauciest lads, Will Wiseman were the worst."

Every one was too much taken up with their own affairs just then to have time to talk about their neighbors; but as soon as the epidemic abated and the first panic was over, you may be sure the people made up for lost time in picking one another's characters to pieces; and the idea of "that low, drinking, swearing, good-for-nothing fellow, Will Wiseman," being always about at Blake's gave them something to talk about.

You would naturally fancy that a motherless girl would be tenderly

treated, especially by mothers with girls of their own; but this, I am afraid, is not the case, and the hardest pecks are, as a rule, administered to such unprotected chicks by the fussy, clucking hens who most carefully gather their own families under their capacious wings.

“And Mrs. Jones do say as how Will ain’t been home this week or more!”

“And Blake that deaf as he don’t know half as goes on under his very nose!”

“And Pris Blake that impident as she won’t take a word from no one, though it’s for her own good!”

I dare say it was well meant, or

partly well meant, and that, as mothers, they knew that it was not safe to allow such a certainly doubtful character as Will Wiseman to be on such easy terms with a girl, and of course if Mrs. Blake had been alive she would not have allowed it; so we will do the village gossips the credit of believing that they did mothers' parts in warning Blake of what was going on. This warning must have been given in stentorian tones, as Blake was deafer than usual just then with a cold, so any whispers or gentle words of caution were quite thrown away on him, and it was difficult to convey what you meant without the subject be-

coming known to every man, woman, and child within half a mile.

I do not know who undertook to inform him, but I think it was a certain Mrs. East, judging from a tightening of Pris's lips whenever that good lady's name was mentioned; and I certainly think it was done by a woman, as I doubt the courage of the men.

But Blake came home one evening very angry. He was a placid sort of man; but when he was once roused he was worse than his more peppery neighbors, as the boys knew from the severity of the very occasional thrashings he gave them. And then, as ill-luck would have it, when

he opened the gate there was Will Wiseman, as if the place belonged to him, carrying Baby, who, though five years old, was little better than her name through weakness,—carrying her up and down in the sun, which was warm that evening on the path under the hedge.

Blake flung down his basket and hoe, and took the child out of Will's arms and bade him, "Be off! and not come about the place again."

Will turned and stared at him in surprise; and Baby, spoilt and fretful through illness, burst out into a roar and struggled and wriggled to get away from her father into Will's arms, and Pris came out to see what was the matter.

“Get along into the house!” Blake said. “I’ll not have you the talk of the place.” And he gave her a push, rougher perhaps than he intended, or else it was the surprise that made her stagger back against the porch as if she would have fallen.

She gave a quick look up at her father’s face as if she thought he might have been drinking, though he was not given to excess, and then at Will, whose face looked very dark and lowering, and whose hand had clenched in a menacing way when Blake pushed her away.

Then she turned white to the lips, and taking Baby in her arms, went into the cottage, soothing the sobbing

child in an odd, mechanical way that frightened her more than her father's violence. When Blake came in a minute afterwards, she listened perfectly silently to what he said till he had done; and then she put her lips close to his ear, and said, "Will Wiseman ain't nothing to me. It's a lie!"

He heard it, though it was not half as loud as the yells most people addressed him with, and Will heard it too, though he was standing on the other side of the road, knocking at his boot with his stick, as was his way when in uncertainty.

"If it's a lie, just send him about his business, and a-done with un."

And Pris got up without another word, and went out to the gate with flaming cheeks and angry eyes. She was angry with all the world, — with the neighbors most of all for their spiteful gossiping, with her father for listening to and believing tales against her, with herself for having given any cause for such talk, and with Will because his name was coupled with hers; she was angry even with Baby's doll, that lay in the path, and she kicked it quite viciously out of the way; and with a branch of the rose-tree by the path, which caught her dress as she passed, and she jerked away, tearing a long rent in her dress as she did so. She for-

got the gratitude she really felt for all Will had done while the children were ill, and she had hardly realized yet the feeling, deeper than gratitude, that was growing in her heart for Will Wiseman; and so she spoke hard, bitter words to him, — words that stung and words that cut.

“Folks is making themselves busy about you and me, Will Wiseman; pity they ain’t something better to do. And I’ve been telling Father as there ain’t nothing between you and me, nor it ain’t likely as there ever would be; and if there weren’t another man in the world, I’d never a-looked at you; and so you’d best be off, and I don’t care if I never sets eyes on you again!”

And more she said of the same sort; and he listened silently, still knocking at his boot with his stick, and with that half-smile on his face which even in the midst of her anger reminded her of nights when he had coaxed Baby to take her medicine, or Annie to swallow a drop of milk, with a patience that had not been worn out by their fretful perverseness. And then he turned without saying a word, and with Jock, with drooping ears and tail between his legs, following at his heels, he went straight off to the "Cricketers" and got drunk.

CHAPTER III.

FOR PRIS.

I would have hid her needle in my heart,
To save her little finger from a scratch
No deeper than the skin.

TENNYSON.

TOM was always rather a care and anxiety to Pris. He had been too near her age when their mother died to yield to her authority as the others did. He remembered too distinctly the games they had had together, and the mischief into which, in old days, Pris had been the first to go. He recollected playing truant with her from school, and passing a lovely day nutting in the woods, and endur-

ing the punishment that ensued in company, consoling one another as best they could by planning further mischief. So she never got him satisfactorily under her thumb; and when he was away at the time of the children's illness, he grew very independent and mannish, and came back with a pipe in his mouth as bold as anything, and dared her to lay her hands on it at her peril. He pretended that he wanted shaving, and scraped away at his smooth young cheeks with Father's blunt old razor till Pris did not know whether to laugh or be angry.

He grew dandified in his dress, too, about this period, and invested

in a pot of strong-smelling pomade, with which he plastered his hair on Sunday; and he bothered Pris's life out over his collars, which he wanted stiffer than her economy over starch would allow. She did not understand what these symptoms meant till she met him one Sunday afternoon out walking with the dairy-maid at the farm, — a young woman considerably his senior, and his superior both in height and breadth, both of them looking unspeakably sheepish and foolish.

I do not think Pris was quite wise in the open derision with which she treated Tom's youthful liking for Susan; but she had a sore little feeling in her own heart just then which

found a certain relief in sharp words to others, and she could not help missing and wishing for Will Wiseman at every turn, though she was angry with herself, and crushed the feeling out of sight impatiently every time it made itself felt.

Will took her at her word, and kept away; at least she never saw him about the place, though sometimes she found some water drawn ready on washing-days, or some sticks chopped, or her basket mended or replaced by a new one. She asked no questions, and pretended to herself that it was one of the children who did these things, though she knew all the time it was not; but on

the days when such things happened, life seemed brighter and pleasanter and easier, and she was not so ready to be down on Tom.

Anything she heard about Will was always unsatisfactory, the neighbors being careful to repeat anything to his discredit; and though Pris tossed her head and appeared quite indifferent on the subject, such bits of news rankled and stuck by her, — such, for instance, as, “That Wiseman he *were* making a noise at the ‘Cricketers’ last night;” “Mrs. Jones do say as how he ain’t been home not to say sober for this week and more;” “Keepers is keeping a sharp lookout after Will Wiseman. They do say

he've been out in the coverts ever so many nights; but he's so deep, there's no catching of him;" "That Will might a-got took on at Farmer Scott's if he hadn't a-been such a lazy, good-for-nothing chap. The farmer says as he's a capital hand to work when he's a mind to; but there! if he ain't a mind, nothing can't stir him."

Pris's eyes grew unaccountably dim as she darned the family stockings at night after hearing such tales, though she indignantly rubbed them clear as she told herself, "It ain't nothing to me."

One day in the summer, when the children came in from school, they

reported that the recruiting-sergeant was down at the "Cricketers."

"He do look smart, Pris. You did oughter a-seen him. His cap were all a-one side over his ear; and he'd a bunch of ribbons all sorts of colors on to it. And there were a lot of the chaps round him; and he were making game of the plough and minding the beasts, and saying as the Whistley chaps was too smart for that sort of stupid work, and had a deal better serve their Queen and country, and see life, and have a bit of fun."

Annie had got it all pat, having listened with wide blue eyes and open mouth and simple, believing

mind, while the sergeant uttered his usual clap-trap remarks to the assembled hobbledelboys ; and she accepted it just as she did the vicar's teachings when he catechised the children on Sunday afternoons.

Even Baby was full of it, and lamented that she could not go as a drummer-boy, being old enough now to recognize the disabilities of her sex, though in younger days she had consulted Pris as to whether, if she was very good and learned to spell, she could some day grow up into a chorister boy.

“Harry says as he won't never go to plough ; and he's put on his hat just like the soldier's, only it

won't keep on, as there ain't no 'lastic."

Pris listened without paying much attention to the children's chatter till she heard one of them mention Will Wiseman.

"Were he there?"

"Yes," said Baby; "he give me this whistle as I come by. He's most days outside the 'Cricketers' when we comes home."

Baby said this in innocence, but the other children, even Annie, laughed, knowing what report said of Will; and Pris colored a dusky red, and bid the children rub the mud off their boots before they came to tea. But she caught hold of Baby as

they went out, on pretence of tying the strings of her pinafore, and whispered, —

“Will ain’t got the ribbons in his hat, Baby, had he now?”

“No, or he’d a-given me a bit for my dolly,” was the reassuring answer.

But all the same, Pris was restless and uneasy that evening, and kept recalling the time when the children were ill, and she had such ready help and sympathy from Will, and the poor thanks he got for it that wretched day when she had spoken so sharply and angrily.

Her father came in out of sorts with cold and rheumatism, and went

to bed, as he often did now, as soon as he had had his supper, in the broad May daylight; and Tom was late in coming in, so the others were all in bed before he appeared, and Pris was left to herself with the work-basket heaped with mending, by the smoky little benzoline lamp.

Her thoughts did not often interfere with her fingers, but to-night they did; and she put down the big darn in the knee of Jimmy's stocking, and went out into the soft, balmy night, where the nightingales were singing and the air was fragrant with the sweet-brier bush by the gate. It was nine o'clock and very quiet, except that from the village, from time to

time, she could hear shouts and noisy laughter and bits of songs, which she guessed came from the "Cricketers." That was a song she knew Will Wiseman sang; she remembered him whistling it when he was helping at the wash-tub, and she fancied, even at this distance, she could distinguish Will's voice in the noisy chorus that took up the tune directly it was started. Presently there was a fresh outburst of noise, as though some of the party were dispersing, and calls of good-night and shrill whistles; and then she heard voices coming up the road, and she drew back behind the hedge to avoid being seen, for the moon had come up behind the trees,

and shone full on the gate. It was two men who lived farther along the road, and she heard them talking as they passed.

“He’ve set his heart on getting Will Wiseman; but Will’s too sharp to be caught by his chaff. He knows what he’s about, Will does; but Sergeant, he won’t rest till Will’s took the shilling, and he’d a deal rather have him than half a dozen of them young louts as’ll come if he whistles to ’em.”

This was encouraging so far. Will was safe; and Pris was turning to go in when another step sounded in the road. It was Tom this time, but not quite Tom’s usual step; and Pris’s

face clouded. Tom had kept pretty straight as regards drink. Now and then at harvest-home or club days he had taken a drop too much, enough to make him heavy and stupid; but this was quite an exception, and when he was a bit late in coming in, Pris was much more inclined to think he was up to some silly nonsense with Susan than that he was at the public-house. But now there was no mistaking his lurching, unsteady step; and when he reached the gate he fumbled with the familiar latch as if he did not know how to open it.

Pris had a great mind to go and rouse up her father to give Tom a

warm reception ; but the snores which resounded from above testified that his slumbers were deep, so Pris relinquished the idea and went forward herself with folded arms to meet the culprit.

“You did ought to be ashamed of yourself!” she began, and had plenty more reproaches to follow, though she might have known the uselessness of reproaching a tipsy man ; but the first words died away on her lips, and she ran forward and caught him by the arm, for as he stumbled up the brick path towards her in the bright moonlight, she saw the bunch of ribbons in his cap.

Pris need not have been so broken-

hearted over Tom's enlisting, nor need all the other mothers and sisters who cry their hearts out and fret themselves ill when their respective sons and brothers and sweethearts take the Queen's shilling.

"I had rather follow him to his grave," I have heard mothers say ; and indeed they talk of it as if it were worse than death. But after all, it is often the very best thing a lad can do ; and those very broken-hearted mothers and sisters and sweethearts are sometimes the first to recognize this, when the first bitterness is over, and the idle, troublesome, mischievous lad comes back a well-drilled, disciplined soldier, with

pluck and purpose put into his aimless, slipshod life.

But Pris, as many another before and since has done and will do, sat and cried as if Tom were given over to hopeless destruction, both soul and body, and looked at the bunch of ribbons in his cap that had fallen on the floor with loathing; while Tom, after an attempt at blustering and a confused effort to repeat some of the convincing arguments of the sergeant, let his heavy head drop forwards on the table and fell asleep.

The door was still open, and the moonlight came in, falling on the girl's head as she sat with her face buried in her hands, and on Tom's

clumsy foot sprawling across the threshold, and on the cap, from the ribbons of which it took all the gay coloring. Now and then the long sad note of the nightingale sounded outside; and once a footstep passed along, and Pris, in the depth of her grief, heard it and listened.

From the road the two figures inside the house could be distinctly seen, though the little lamp gave but a poor light; and Will Wiseman could see them well, and presently he opened the gate and came to the door.

“Pris,” he said, “I’ve a-done all I knew to keep him off it; but he wouldn’t be kep. I brought him

out twice, and started him home; but the other chaps thought 't were a good bit of fun, and set him agin me, and said I'd no business to meddle with his concerns, and he'd a right to do as he liked. I kep sober a-purpose, I did, Pris. I ain't had half a pint, so as to keep a eye on him, knowing how you'd be put about if he 'listed. I'd have give my right hand, that I would, to keep him off it; but they saw my game, and they got me out of the way for a minute, and when I come back he'd gone and done it. Don'tee cry, Pris, don'tee now! I can't a-bear to see you!"

"Would n't they let him off, Will?"

she sobbed; "he's such a lad. Though he's well growed and thinks himself a man, he ain't much more of a man than Harry or Jimmy. He don't know his own mind a bit, and he's led as easy as Baby by any one as has the mind; and Mother always thought a terrible deal of Tom. It would 'a' broke her heart to think he'd 'listed, and she'd 'a' said 't was because I had n't made his home comfortable; and I know as how I've been sharp with him at times and given him the rough side of my tongue when he was tiresome over them collars. But I didn't mean nothing by it; and I don't think as I'll ever get over it if he goes off this way!"

Will stood listening silently. Pris felt a little hurt at what seemed like a want of sympathy after his first words, which had been so kind and consoling. He stood leaning against the doorpost, black against the moonlight. What a big, fine-looking young fellow he was ! No wonder the sergeant cast covetous eyes on him ; close upon six foot in height, and with broad shoulders and well-knit limbs, there was not another young fellow in Whistley to compare with him.

Presently he turned and went away without a word, hurt perhaps, Pris thought, by her want of gratitude again. After all, he had done all he could to prevent it ; and he had no

call to do even that after the way she and Father had treated him. But she was too miserable about Tom to think much about Will.

She tried to rouse Tom up from his heavy sleep and induce him to go to bed ; but all the pushings and pullings would not wake him, beyond a sense that he was being bothered and a tendency to hit out at his persecutor. And she was just going to turn out the lamp and leave him and go up to bed, when quick footsteps sounded outside, and Will Wiseman stood there again. He walked with a brisk, alert step, and he looked taller than when he stood there a few minutes before, for he was drawn up,

with his shoulders back as if he had had a touch of the drill that awaited poor slouching Tom sprawling there over the table, and his voice had a ring and a life in it that was new to its slow Berkshire accent.

“Pris,” he said, “it’s all right. I’ve a-done it. Tom ain’t a-going; I’m to go instead. Only look here, it ain’t regular nohow, this ain’t; and it’s only as the sergeant, he’s been after me all day, he’d got a bet with t’other chap as he’d ’list me afore he’d done with me. I’m a bit taller than Tom there, you see, and stronger; and as luck would have it, none of the chaps was actually by when Tom done it. But we’ll have

to keep it dark, and when Tom wakes up he's not like to remember clear what he's been after; so if he talks about 'listing, you'll tell him he's just mistook, and that he'd took too much and made a fool of himself, and the less as he says about it the better. Here, fetch them ribbons out of his cap and stick 'em in mine. Why, Pris, what's wrong now? What be crying for? 'T were just for you as I've done it. It can't never be as you keer about *my* going away. Why, Pris, I thought as there was n't no one would keer about my going away, and that as long as Tom bid at home, 't would make it all right. Why, Pris? Pris? Pris?"

Will Wiseman had enlisted just to keep Pris from crying; but now, so greatly do circumstances alter cases, he would have enlisted twenty times over to make her cry like that, for she was crying for him, and with her head on his shoulder.

CHAPTER IV.

A GOLDEN DAY.

“Once in the days of golden weather,
Days that were always fair,
Love was the world we walked together;
Oh, what a love was there !”

So the recruiting-sergeant won his bet, and carried off Will Wiseman among the other raw hobbledehoys he took with him next morning to Aldershot, — a very shambling, shame-faced crew, inwardly repentant, and some of them with tears painfully near their eyes, a weakness which they felt was hardly consistent with their new character of brave de-

fenders of their country. Only Will held up his head and stepped out with a boldness and spirit new to him; and at the turn of the road which led up to the Blakes' cottage he looked round and took off his cap with the gay ribbons in it and waved it to Pris, who stood at her gate bare-armed from the wash-tub and holding poor Jock, who was howling and straining with all his might, with that desperate longing of his faithful heart to follow his master, — a feeling which perhaps was not unshared by the very person who prevented him from going.

As for Tom, he spent that day in a maze. He woke up with a very

tolerably clear recollection of what had happened the evening before, combined with a racking headache and an overwhelming repugnance to the military life which had appeared so entrancing the day before. He shut his eyes and tried to go to sleep again and forget it, but there was no doing that; and a heavy groan told Pris he was awake and suffering in mind or body. She had not much pity for him, I am afraid, and thought he deserved a sharp punishment; so she left him alone a bit, and even smiled a little when a heart-rending groan or ejaculation of despair reached her; but presently she came to the foot of the stairs and called up

them, "Ain't you never going to get up? It's hard on seven; and you'll get the sack if you're late again."

"I ain't a-going to work," in a very doleful voice.

"Not going to work? and why not, I'd like to know? If you think you're going to bide at home and get drunk on Father's earnings, you'll find you're mighty mistook."

A groan. "Ain't you heard, then? Don't you know?"

"I know as you come in last night the worse for drink, so as I'd a mind to shut the door on you and let you sleep where you might, as weren't fit to be under a decent roof."

"Pris, I say, come here."

"Well, what is it?"

"Didn't you know as I'd 'listed? Oh, Lor!" Tom groaned, rolling his face down into the pillow. "How could I 'a' been such a fool?"

"'Listed? Go along with your rubbish! You didn't know what you was up to, as did ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"Look at my cap," he said. "You'll see fast enough as it ain't gammon; I only wish it was!"

"Well, here's your cap. What's the matter with it?"

Tom sat up in bed, staring with hot, inflamed eyes, and pushing his hands through his rough hair. "Ain't

there the ribbons in it?" he said.

"Could I 'a' dreamt all that?"

The kettle boiling over called Pris away; and presently Tom came slouching down, still with that puzzled, staring look in his face.

"I say, Pris, ain't I said nothing when I come in last night about having 'listed? I'm bothered if I can recollect how it was."

"You talked a deal of nonsense, and the less you says about it the better. I reckon you don't want to go soldiering this morning, anyhow; and you'd best go up to the farm and keep out of the way till the soldier chaps have cleared off, so as to have no more talk about it."

And so Tom did, though he was not given, as a rule, to following Pris's advice; but it was long before he lost that puzzled look, and no one ever told him that his memory had not played him as false as he believed, and that but for Will Wiseman he would have been enlisted fast and firm in her Majesty's line.

"I say, Pris Blake," called out one of the neighbors passing the cottage that afternoon, as Pris was hanging out the clothes, "have you heard as that fine flame of yours, Will Wiseman, got tight last night at the 'Cricketers,' and was 'listed when he did n't know what he was after?"

"No, I ain't heard it," said Pris; "and if I had I shouldn't 'a' believed it."

"Well, then, it's true; for I see him go off with the sergeant and the other chaps this morning with my very own eyes."

"Who said he were tight?"

"Why, my Joe; he were there, and he see the fun."

"Was he took home in a wheelbarrow, your Joe? It would n't be the first time, as I've heard tell."

The woman gave an offended toss of her head and prepared to move on; but invincible curiosity overcame the offence, and she came back.

"Folks had got it about that your

Tom had took the shilling; but he weren't with the other chaps this morning. Why, if you ain't got that brute of a dog of Wiseman's! Bless the girl! whatever are you untying him for? I've heard as he bites cruel?"

"So he do," said Pris, calmly, going on undoing the rope that held him. "He's a terrible one to bite where he don't take a fancy, and I'm going to give him a bit of a run." Which ended the conversation abruptly.

More than a year passed by since Will Wiseman went for a soldier; and I think most of the Whistley people had forgotten all about

him, so slight a thing is memory except when it is made indelible by love, or perhaps by hate. It would be mortifying to most of us, to know how short a time we should be missed if we were removed by any cause from the circle of which we seem so important a part; and Will had never been an important part of any circle.

Pris Blake remembered him, though in her busy life she had little time for day-dreams or sentimental regrets. Jock remembered him, though he soon gave up the howlings that had filled the first few nights his master was away, and the wistful watching and listen-

ing that had made Pris more than once, when no one was looking, go out and put her arm round his rough neck and kiss his grizzly head. He made himself quite at home at the Blakes', and followed the children to school and pottered about after the boys, assisting in their ratting adventures, but with a certain superior air as of one who had seen better sport in his day; and he spent a good deal of time asleep on the brick path in the sun or in front of the fire in the winter. He never took to Tom at all, and had a tendency to growl and show his teeth at him, though Tom tried hard to ingratiate himself with him,

with a view to possible rabbitings in the future. But it was to Pris that Jock was particularly devoted, though she did not take very much notice of him in a general way; but he would come away from all the others to follow her, and he would lie on the edge of her dress when she would let him, or push a cold nose into her hand with a hasty caress he did not vouchsafe to other people, and sometimes he would look up at her with that strange intent look that dogs give, that is a long way nearer sympathy than most of the empty chatter the lords of creation dignify with that name.

It was one Sunday in June that

Jock was looking up at Pris with that look of understanding. She was sitting at the end of the garden on the low wall that divides it from the meadow; and Jock had got up by her side on the wall, and had given a gentle little rub against her arm to attract her attention to a sympathizing friend. She had not often time to notice Jock; but she had washed up the dinner things and sent off the children to school, and the others had gone out, and for a wonder she felt a little idle and gave way to the feeling, sitting there in the sun, picking little bits of moss and lichen from between the stones, with Jock beside her.

She had something extra to think of to-day, for Polly had come home for the day, very pretty and happy and nicely dressed, making Pris feel old and rough and shabby beside her. She had brought presents for the children, and they all clung about her, and made much of her; even Baby, who was like Pris's very own, had joined the admiring group, and stroked Polly's dress and strutted about with her parasol, and pulled her chair at dinner away from its usual place close to Pris, to put it near Polly. Only Jock stuck close to Pris, and was not to be beguiled away by the charms of the new-comer.

But this was not all, for with Polly came a young man with whom she was keeping company, — a very respectable, steady young man, of whom her mistress entirely approved. He was in a shop at Medington, and appeared exceedingly elegant in the eyes of Polly's family ; and in Polly's own eyes, no doubt, he was perfection. She was a little afraid of what he would think of her home ; and she wished Pris had put on her Sunday dress, if she had one, which was more than doubtful. But Polly was too placid and simple-minded to torment herself with such feelings ; and Fred got on so well with them all, and made himself so much at home, and

the old cottage was so sunny and pleasant, with the roses out in bloom and the beans filling the air with their fragrance, that she felt he must like it. Indeed, though he and his mother lived in furnished lodgings which were very genteel, they were also somewhat close and stuffy; and he appreciated the airy freshness of the cottage, with its open door and the sweet scents that were wafted in from garden and hay-field and honeysuckle hedge.

After dinner Father proposed a walk round the farm before church-time.

"Couldn't you come too, Pris?" Polly said rather doubtfully, won-

dering if the old battered hat hanging on the nail behind the door were still Pris's only head-covering.

"No," said Pris, with the least little tinge of bitterness in her heart, — "no; I ain't smart enough, and besides, I've got to wash up. There, go along," she added, as Polly stood hesitating, with compunction in her heart at leaving Pris. "Go along; it's your holiday, ain't it? and you'd best make the best of it, for I'll be bound you works hard enough most days."

And then, with a motherly feeling in her heart for the young sister, she put her arm round her and gave her a sudden, rough little kiss. "I likes

your young man, Poll," she said; "he's a good sort. I likes his ways with Father."

"Yes; ain't he nice?" Polly answered, beaming. "I knew you'd like him, Pris. You *are* a dear!"

And then she went on to join her lover; and Pris, having done her washing-up, sat on the wall and thought, and perhaps for the first time in her life a little feeling of discontent made itself felt.

"I never has no holiday! and I works hard enough, and I've not got a young man to walk out with on Sunday afternoons."

But at that very moment Jock, who had pushed his head confidingly

under her arm, suddenly pulled it away, and sat for a minute with pricked ears, quivering all over, as if every faculty was absorbed in that of hearing, and then with a shrill little bark of ecstatic delight, leaped off the wall and ran across the garden and out into the road.

Such a blaze of scarlet cloth and white pipe-clayed belt and glitter of shining accoutrements! such a jingle of spurs and sword! such a smart military step and head held high in the June sunshine, drilling seeming to have added a couple of inches to his height, it was a wonder that Jock should have recognized his old master with his slouching gait and

stooping shoulders, — the master at whose shabby heels Jock had gone into so much mischief. But, bless your heart! it was Will Wiseman Jock loved and remembered, not his clothes.

But Jock did not get much attention just then, for Will came striding in, flinging open the wicket-gate and clanking up the brick path in very different style from the furtive way in which he used to come in, as if he expected to be sent about his business, and was only there on sufferance; and half a dozen steps took him across the garden to where Pris sat still on the wall, and he had both her hands in his and was saying, "Pris, my girl, are you glad to see me?"

Changed? Why, he was not the least bit changed; it was the very same Will Wiseman that was looking down at her with those honest, loving brown eyes, — the same Will that had peeled the potatoes and painted the children's throats; the same that had come in that night when she was so upset about Tom's enlisting, with such a world of concern and pity for her in his face.

They sat for a bit on the wall and talked, with Jock every now and then squeezing in between them when he got a chance; and then nothing would serve but that Pris should put on her hat and come out.

“ You ain't never been out walking

with me, Pris, that you ain't! And I come right away here and spoke to nobody; and I'd like to take a look round. And then there's church. Folks as is keeping company goes to church on Sundays, don't they? and I'd like folks to see as you and me was doing it all proper, eh, Pris? Not smart enough? Rubbish! I've seen a sight of gals since I left here, and some on 'em smart enough, but not one fit to hold a candle to you."

"Go along with your nonsense!" said Pris, stroking down the splendid scarlet of his sleeve.

It was all nonsense, she knew; but she had had so little nonsense in her life that it was very pleasant for a

change. "I never has no holiday," she had said not half an hour before, and "I've not got a young man to walk out with me on Sunday afternoons;" and now she was putting on her hat to go out for a holiday with a young man that she knew would be the envy of all the girls in the place. She wished she had a new hat; but what did it matter? "You looks nice in everything," Will said; "it don't matter what you has on."

And while he waited, he filled the kettle for tea, showing that he had not forgotten the trick of the old well and the long pole that drew up the bucket; and then they started off down into the village, for the church

bells had begun, and there was quite a commotion as they passed, — the people not recognizing the ne'er-do-well gypsy lad in the smart soldier. And not a glance or a whisper was lost on Pris, whose heart was full of pride of her soldier as they passed in at the churchyard gate, and he followed with his clanking spurs up the aisle to their usual seat, where Polly and her Fred had already been reaping a modest harvest of observation and attention from the neighbors, but were now quite thrown into the shade by the splendid apparition of Will's broad scarlet shoulders. It made Pris thrill all over with proud satisfaction to hear the clatter

of Will's sword and buckles when he got up or sat down; and though neither of them could see a word in the little hymn-book they held together, and there were plenty more hard by, it gave them both acute pleasure to share it.

And when they came out of church Pris had a proud time of it; the Vicar overtook them in the churchyard and shook hands with Will and clapped him on the shoulder and said he was glad to see him,—this black sheep that had been regarded as such a discredit to the place. People who had not had a good word for him in old times now received him as hail-fellow-well-met. But it was the behavior

of the girls that most amused and astonished Pris; girls who entirely ignored Will Wiseman in former days, who would not as much as look at him, now smiled their sweetest on him and called him Mr. Wiseman, and were of a sudden so friendly with Pris herself, and asked why she never came to see them, and would n't she and Mr. Wiseman come in and have a cup of tea, Mother would be so pleased, as was saying only the other day, whatever have become of Pris Blake ? and so on.

If one person offered them tea, a dozen did; and Pris felt quite afraid that Will would be carried off by main force, so wonderfully hospitable

had the Whistley people become. But Will drew her hand under his arm there before them all, with Bessie Green looking on with her fashionable new hat and kid gloves, and Miss Grove, the pupil-teacher, who was almost a young lady, and yet looked very smilingly on Will; and he drew her away from them all, as if he could not be bothered to talk to them any longer, and wanted no one but her, which was just what he really felt.

They went round by Whistley Heath, where the old cottage stood empty and half in ruins, Will's grandfather having been moved into the workhouse infirmary nearly a year

before. The heath was ablaze with gorse, quite dazzling in the sun ; and in the garden among the plentiful and flourishing weeds, self-sown flowers asserted themselves, — mignonette and blue convolvulus and wallflower ; and on the brier that Will had budded himself was a lovely crimson rose that looked fine stuck in Pris's jacket.

“ In four years I'll be coming home, Pris,” he said, as he fastened the rose in, “ and then I'll be three years in the reserve ; but that won't hinder our being married. And I've a great notion as we'd try and get this old place. It would want a deal doing to it ; but I'm handy like about a place, and I'd get it all as

nice as a new pin for my wife, eh, Pris? But I'd not idle about neither; I'd get regular work. Would n't I just work hard?"

And so on; and Pris listened with smiling eyes wandering away over the golden gorse. It was all scarlet and gold that day in Pris's memory.

And then they went back to tea, and Pris felt quite sorry for Polly, so entirely were she and Fred thrown into the shade by the glories of the new-comer. Why, by the side of Will, Fred looked the merest little counter-jumper, with narrow, sloping shoulders and crooked legs; and the children, who had been such servile admirers of Polly and Fred at dinner,

now went over shamelessly to Will and swarmed about him, and had no eyes for any one else, and every now and then had to be cleared away with a sweep of the strong scarlet arm, for he would not let any of them come between him and Pris.

And Father had forgotten all about that scene when he had sent Will off with a flea in his ear after the diphtheria; and he quite chirruped up, and did not seem half as deaf as usual, and heard all that Will said to him better even than he had Fred's remarks at dinner. Tom, to be sure, was a little bit glum, partly out of envy, fondly believing that he would have made every bit as

fine a soldier as Will, "who was never reckoned of no account in old times;" and would not Susan have thought a lot of him then, instead of snubbing him as she had taken to doing of late? And added to this was the old feeling of puzzle as to what really happened that night at the "Cricketers," when he was pretty well sure he had enlisted.

But no one paid much attention to Tom and his sulks; and nothing happened to disturb the brightness of the day within or without. You hear of people having red-letter days in their lives; but this Sunday was gorgeously illuminated with scarlet and gold on the dull page of Pris's quiet life.

But the brightest days come to an end, and Will had to be off to catch the last up-train; and Father and Tom, with that dreadful want of consideration observable in fathers and brothers, proposed to go and see him off. But now it was Polly's turn to come to the rescue; and it spoke well for her kind heart, for she must have felt a little being thrown into the shade by her sister's splendid lover, and besides, it meant the sacrifice of her own lingering walk in the moonlight with Fred. But she made a little fuss about wanting Father and Tom to wait and go with her and Fred, whose train was not for twenty minutes

after Will's, and she whispered to Pris to hurry up and be off.

"I can walk out with Fred any day, but you ain't a chance of seeing your young man."

The positions were just reversed; and Pris could almost have laughed at the motherly tone in little Polly's voice, and the artful way in which she managed to engross Father and Tom.

And so Pris and Will had their walk together across the hay-fields and through the lanes between the honeysuckle-laden hedges, in the clear June moonlight, as pretty a walk as any one could wish to see, and especially in the moonlight, with the long shadows of the hedge-

row elms falling across the broad meadows, and silver streaks of light drawn on Farmer Lloyd's big pond; but the barest, bleakest scene, with a blizzard blowing in their faces, would have been no less beautiful to those two.

“Good-by; God bless you, dear! I don't know when I'll be able to see you again, as they say we're like to be sent abroad. But anyhow, in four years I'll be home, and you'll wait for me, Pris? You won't take up with any other chap? You'll wait for me?”

“Yes,” she said, “I'll wait for you.”

And then he was gone.

CHAPTER V:

THE END OF WAITING.

That He Who made both life and death,
He knoweth which is best;
We live to Him, we die to Him,
And leave Him all the rest.

MRS. CRAIK.

"It's sort of disappointing, for you see Will'll be coming home this spring," Pris said, "and I'd 'a' liked to have seen him."

She was a little easier that afternoon, and Polly had put the pillows so as to raise her, and she could see out of the window into the garden, where the spring was beginning to show itself, in spite of

the cold east wind, in buds on the gooseberry bushes and pink blossom on the ribes.

Mr. Mason, the Vicar, had been in that afternoon, sitting with Pris, and had told her what had become sadly apparent during the last few days,—that she was not likely to live very long.

It had been a very cold, bitter winter, and Pris had got a severe chill. There were so many to be thought of for sound boots and knitted stockings and flannel that any one who came last in consideration, as Pris always did, was likely to come poorly off (Polly cried a bit when she saw Pris's flan-

nel petticoat). The cold settled on Pris's lungs, and she took no notice, and crawled about as long as she was able over the washing and cooking and cleaning that had to be done.

The boys had all left school by then, and were out at work at different farms; but Harry and Jimmy still lived at home, and had to be washed and mended and done for by Pris, and kept out of mischief as much as possible. Lucy was the only one at school, and she was thirteen and nearly as tall as Pris, and nearly as old as Pris was when she took up the reins of government. Annie was nursemaid at the Vicarage, and Tom had married his Susan a

year ago, and had a slatternly, untidy wife and a constantly crying baby in his bare little home, neither of whom, I regret to say, kept him from very constant attendance at the "Cricketers."

Sometimes it crossed Pris's mind whether after all it would not have been better for Tom to go as a soldier, — whether this sort of slipshod life of Tom's was worth the sacrifice Will had made for it; but she was not given to vain speculations, and it is impossible for the wisest of us to estimate the worth-while of things.

Pris had heard nothing of Will since that golden Sunday; but this had been no disappointment, since

she knew that he was a poor scholar, and her own scholarship was of such an unreliable character that a letter, even a love-letter, would have been rather an embarrassment, as it would have entailed the necessity of answering it, and all by herself too, without Lucy's help, who was quite a good little scholar, and always took the main part of the labor of any family correspondence. But she reckoned the days back to that Sunday and on to the day when he would come home, comforting her patient heart with memory or anticipation when things went criss-cross, as they are apt to do in life. It never occurred to her mind that Will might not

come back, still less that when he came she might not be there to receive him.

When she got too ill to keep about, Polly came home to nurse her. Polly was going to be married very soon to her Fred, who had quite justified the good opinion they had formed of him, and had been very faithful to Polly, and steady and hard-working in his business, so that he would have a comfortable home to offer her when the time came for their wedding.

Pris took what Mr. Mason said very quietly. He thought at first she hardly understood ; she was very weak, and he fancied that her mind

was dulled and unable to take in fresh ideas. He had been a little bit nervous in telling her she was going to die, and had expected great agitation and a scene that would wring his heart; but perhaps there was something more pathetic in the composed, matter-of-fact way she took it.

“ Well, Annie’s old enough now to come home and see to Father, and his rheumatics ain’t near so bad as they used to be since he wore that bit of new flannel; and Annie, she knows about keeping his things aired, and if she can’t quite manage the washing at first, Tom’s wife would help her a bit nows and thens; and Lucy, she’s getting ter-

rible handy, and she 's a deal stronger than she were, and don't get that croupy cough in the winter as she used. I'd 'a' liked to have finished them new shirts for Jimmy, but there! they 're all cut out, and Annie could place them so as Lucy could finish them off."

Her mind kept running off into what seemed to Mr. Mason insignificant details, not realizing how great a part in Pris's life such details had formed; but when he spoke of the great change that lay so near her, he could not tell whether she quite understood, though she said, "Yes, sure," and "There now! so 't is," and repeated the "Amen" at the end of

the prayers he said, and "Thank you kindly, sir," when he gave her his blessing and went away. He did not say anything about Will Wiseman, though he had not forgotten that Sunday and the proud look on Pris's face, but he had that feeling shared by many, that at the solemn hour of death human love must be put aside with other worldly things, forgetting how strong in the suffering Heart upon the Cross the human love for the mother and the friend was, and how love is stronger than death, and never faileth though all else may vanish away.

After Mr. Mason had gone away Pris told Polly, in the words at the

beginning of the chapter, the disappointment it was to go without seeing Will again, and she cried a little over it; and Polly, with the prospect of her own marriage so bright and near before her, said it did seem a bit hard and cried too. But after that Pris did not seem to fret, but lay very quiet, waiting for the end.

That end did not come till nearly a week had passed, and, indeed, she rallied a little, so that they thought perhaps she might get about again, and the end when it came was unexpected.

It was a bright, beautiful May afternoon. Lucy, when she came in

from school to dinner, had brought in a bit of gorse in flower, and Pris had seemed quite pleased with it, and would have it laid on the broad window-ledge, for her bed was across the little window. The sun poured in bright and warm across the patch-work quilt; and Polly wanted to draw the curtain, but Pris would not let her.

Polly had been washing out a few things that morning, and on the gooseberry bushes outside were hung some of her father's red cotton handkerchiefs. Whether it was this and the sun shining on the gorse that brought back that golden Sunday so vividly to Pris, I do not know; but

when she spoke, which was not very often, it was always of Will and, of his red coat, and of his bright sword and spurs.

Jock, who was getting an old dog now, and lazy, and blind with one eye, had crept up and got onto the foot of the bed, — an unheard-of intrusion in old times ; but the last week he had done it unrebuked, for Pris seemed to like to have him there, and there was so little she cared for or noticed now, as mind and body fell into the drowsiness that often precedes the long sleep.

Polly had brought her work upstairs that afternoon and sat by the bedside, not thinking Pris was worse

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in any way, for she was very quiet and seemed to doze off now and then.

But suddenly she stirred, and raised herself on her pillows with more strength than she had done for days past, and looked eagerly out of the window, over the golden gorse, into the garden where the sun shone on the red handkerchiefs drying on the gooseberry bushes; and such a look of surprise and pleasure and delight came into her face that Polly dropped her work and bent across the bed to see who it was coming up the path.

And not only Polly, but Jock stirred too and pricked his ears, quivering all over with expectation as he

had done that Sunday when he sat by Pris on the garden wall; and he gave, as then, a little shrill bark of ecstatic delight. But Polly could see no one. There was the old tom-cat sunning himself on the bricks, and eyed by a robin on the gate with inquisitive interest.

“There ain’t no one,” Polly said; “what did you see? I thought some one was coming in.”

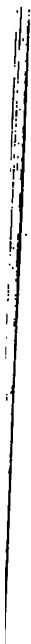
And some one indeed had entered, for when she turned to pick up her work and sit down again, she saw that death had come, silently, gently, kindly, and that Pris had fallen back with the sweet, bright look of welcome and delight on her dead face.

“It do seem hard on her, poor girl, and her sweetheart coming home maybe to-morrow!” sobbed Polly that night to Fred, who had come over to see her. “But there! God knows best.”

But she was wrong when she said it was hard, and right, more right than she knew, when she said, “God knows best,” for how few of us who use the words realize a hundredth part of the wisdom and tender mercy of His Providence! Pris was spared long weeks, perhaps months, of hope deferred, ending, if the news ever found its way to Whistley, in bitter disappointment, for Will Wiseman never came back, having died three

weeks before Pris, of fever, in the hospital at Aden on his way home to England. Could it have been that when the gate of death opened so gently for Pris to pass through, she could see Will in the brightness on the other side, and that this accounted for the look of surprise and delight on her dying face? Who can say?

THE END.



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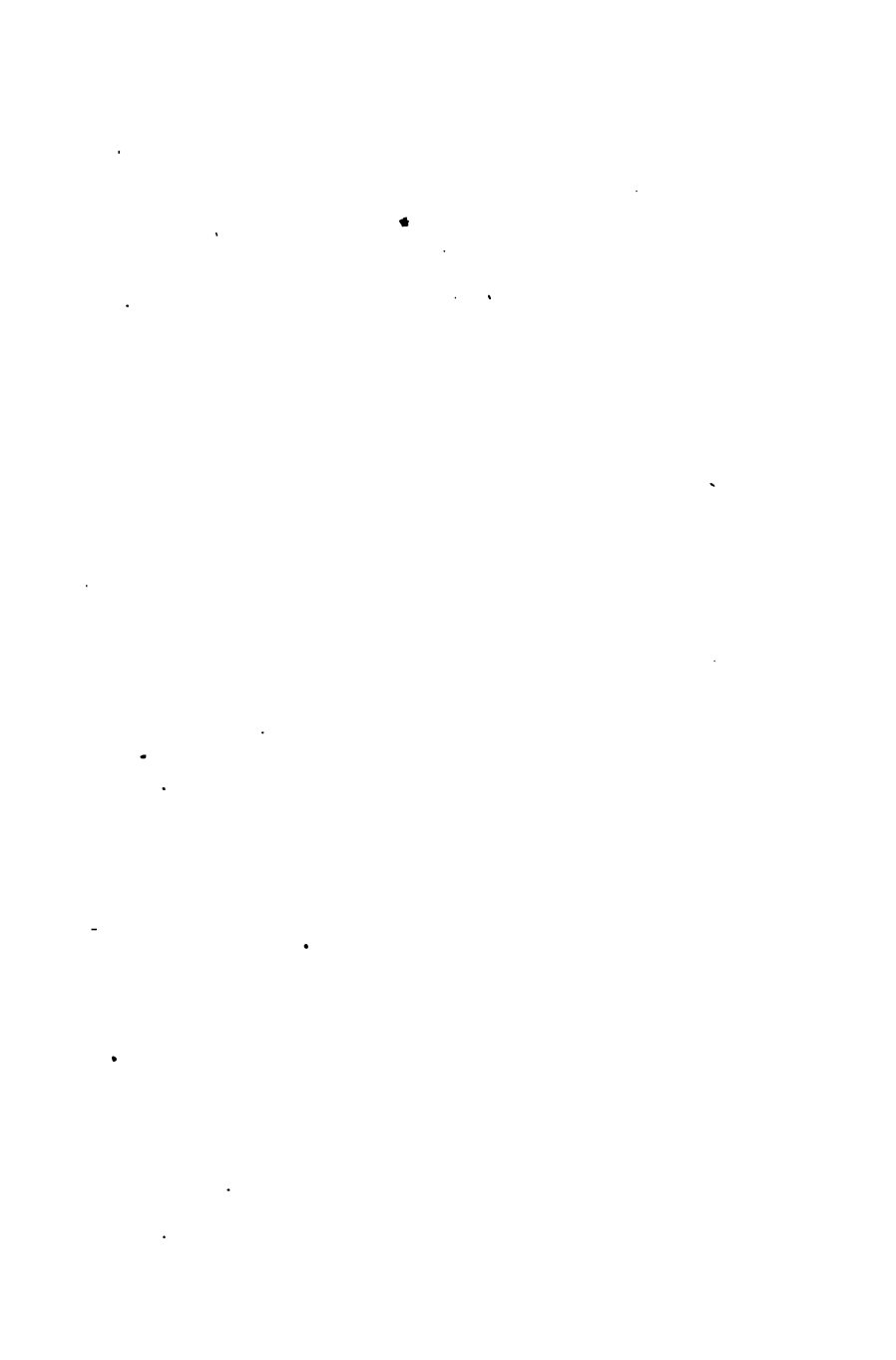
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